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ON BAILE'S STRAND

BY

W. B. YEATS

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## ON BAILE'S STRAND

CUCHULAIN, the King of Muirthemne.

CONCHUBAR, the High King of Ulad.

DAIRE, a King.

FINTAIN, a blind man.

BARACH, a fool.

A Young Man.

Young Kings and old Kings.

SCENE. *A great hall at Dundegalán ; not "Cuchulain's great ancient house," but an assembly house nearer to the sea. A big door at the back, and through the door misty light as of sea mist. There are many chairs on either side raised one above another, tier above tier. One of these chairs, which is turned towards the front of the stage, is bigger than the others. An elaborate cloak lies on a chair at the other side. Somewhere at the back there is a table with flagons of ale upon it and drinking horns. There is a small door at one side of the hall. A Fool and Blind Man come in through the door at the back. They wear patched and ragged clothes, and the Blind Man leans upon a staff.*

*Fool.* What a clever man you are, though you are blind ! There's nobody with two eyes in his head that is as clever as you are. Who but you could have thought that the henwife sleeps every day a little at noon ! I would never be able to steal anything if you didn't tell me where to look

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for it. And what a good cook you are! You take the fowl out of my hands after I have stolen it, and you pluck it, and put it into the big pot at the fire there, and I can go out and run races with the witches at the edge of the waves and get an appetite; and when I've got it, there's the hen waiting inside for me done to the turn!

*Blind Man.* [*Who is feeling about with his stick.*] Done to the turn.

*Fool.* [*Putting his arm round Blind Man's neck.*] Come now, I'll have a leg and you'll have a leg, and we'll draw lots for the wish-bone. I'll be praising you—I'll be praising you while we're eating it—for your good plans and for your good cooking. There's nobody in the world like you, Blind man. Come, come—wait a minute—I shouldn't have closed the door. There are some that look for me, and I wouldn't let them find me. Don't tell it to any body, Blind Man. There are some that follow me: Boann herself out of the river, and Fand out of the deep sea—witches they are, and they come by in the wind and they cry, "Give a kiss, Fool, give a kiss!" That's what they cry. That's wide enough; all the witches can come in now. I wouldn't have them beat at the door and say, "Where is the Fool? Why has he put a lock on the door?" Maybe they'll hear the bubbling of a pot and come in and sit on the ground—but we won't give them any of the fowl—let them go back to the sea, let them go back to the sea.

*Blind Man.* [*Feeling legs of chair with his hands.*]

Ah! [*Then in a louder voice as he feels the back of it.*] Ah—ah

*Fool.* Why do you say "ah—ah"?

*Blind Man.* I know the big chair. It is to-day the High King Conchubar is coming. They have brought out his chair. He is going to be Cuchulain's master in earnest from this day out. It is that he's coming for.

*Fool.* He must be a great man to be Cuchulain's master.

*Blind Man.* So he is. He is a great man. He is over all the rest of the kings of Ireland.

*Fool.* Cuchulain's master! I thought Cuchulain could do anything he liked.

*Blind Man.* So he did, so he did; but he ran too wild, and Conchubar is coming to-day to put an oath upon him that will stop his rambling and make him as biddable as a house dog and keep him always at his hand. He will sit in this chair and put the oath upon him. [*He sits in chair.*]

*Fool.* How will he do that?

*Blind Man.* You have no wits to understand such things. He will sit up in this chair, and he'll say, "Take the oath, Cuchulain; I bid you take the oath. Do as I tell you. What are your wits compared with mine? And what are your riches compared with mine? And what sons have you to pay your debts and to put a stone over you when you die? Take the oath, I tell you; take a strong oath."

*Fool.* [*Crumpling himself up and whining.*] I will not—I'll take no oath—I want my dinner.



*Blind Man.* Hush ! hush ! It is not done yet.

*Fool.* You said it was done to a turn.

*Blind Man.* Did I, now ! Well, it might be done and not done. The wings might be white, but the legs might be red ; the flesh might stick hard to the bones and not come away in the teeth . . . but believe me, Fool, it will be well done before you put your teeth in it.

*Fool.* My teeth are growing long with the hunger.

*Blind Man.* I'll tell you a story. The kings have story tellers while they are waiting for their dinner. I will tell you a story with a fight in it, a story with a champion in it, and a ship and a queen's son that has his mind set on killing somebody that you and I know.

*Fool.* Who is that ? Who is he coming to kill ?

*Blind Man.* Wait, now, till you hear. When you were stealing the fowl I was lying in a hole in the sand, and I heard three men coming with a shuffling sort of noise. They were wounded and groaning.

*Fool.* Go on, tell me about the fight.

*Blind Man.* There had been a fight, a great fight, a tremendous great fight. A young man had landed on the shore, the guardians of the shore had asked his name and he had refused to tell it, and he had killed one and others had run away.

*Fool.* That's enough. Come on, now, to the fowl. I wish it was bigger. I wish it was as big as a goose.

*Blind Man.* Hush ! I haven't told you all. I know who that young man is. I heard the men who were running away say he had red hair, that he came

from Aoife's country, that he was coming to kill Cuchulain.

*Fool.* Nobody could do that.

[*To a tune.*]

Cuchulain has killed kings,

Kings and sons of kings,

Dragons out of the water,

And witches out of the air,

Bocanachs and Bananachs and people of the woods.

*Blind Man.* Hush ! hush !

*Fool.* [*Still singing*]

Witches that steal the milk,

Fomor that steal the children,

Hags that have heads like hares,

Hares that have claws like witches,

All riding a cock-horse.

[*Spoken.*]

Out of the very bottom of the bitter black North.

*Blind Man.* Hush, I say !

*Fool.* Does Cuchulain know that he is coming to kill him ?

*Blind Man.* How would he know that with his head in the clouds ? He doesn't care for common fighting. Why would he put himself out, and nobody in it but that young man ? Now, if it were a white fawn that might turn into a queen before morning—

*Fool.* Come to the fowl. I wish it was as big as a pig. A fowl with goose-grease and pig's crackling.

*Blind Man.* No hurry, no hurry. I know whose son it is. I wouldn't tell anybody else, but I will tell you. A secret is better to you than your dinner.



You like being told secrets.

*Fool.* Tell me the secret.

*Blind Man.* That young man is Aoife's son. . . I am sure it is Aoife's son; it is borne in upon me that it is Aoife's son. You have often heard me talking of Aoife, the great woman fighter Cuchulain got the mastery over in the North?

*Fool.* I know, I know. She is one of those cross queens that live in hungry Scotland.

*Blind Man.* I am sure it is her son. I was in Aoife's country for a long time.

*Fool.* That was before you were blinded for putting a curse upon the wind.

*Blind Man.* There was a boy in her house that had her own red colour on him, and everybody said he was to be brought up to kill Cuchulain, that she hated Cuchulain. She used to put a helmet on a pillar stone and call it Cuchulain and set him casting at it. . . . There is a step outside—Cuchulain's step.

[*Cuchulain passes by in the mist outside the big door.*]

*Fool.* Where is Cuchulain going?

*Blind Man.* He is going to meet Conchubar, that has bidden him to take the oath.

*Fool.* Ah! an oath, Blind Man. . . . How can I remember so many things at once? Who is going to take an oath?

*Blind Man.* Cuchulain is going to take an oath to Conchubar, who is High King.

*Fool.* What a mix-up you make of everything, Blind Man! You were telling me one story, and

now you are telling me another story. How can I understand things, when they begin to happen, if you mix up everything at the beginning?—Wait till I settle it out. [*Takes off shoes.*] There now, there's Cuchulain, and there is the young man that is coming to kill him, and Cuchulain doesn't know. But where's Conchubar? [*Takes bag from side.*] That's Conchubar with all his riches.—Cuchulain—Conchubar—the Young Man.—And where's Aoife? [*Throws up cap.*] There is Aoife, high up on the mountains in high hungry Scotland. [*Begins putting on shoes.*] Maybe it's not true after all. Maybe it was your own making up. It's many a time you cheated me before with your lies. Come to the cooking-pot, my stomach is pinched and rusty. Would you have it be creaking like a gate?

*Blind Man.* I tell you it's true. And more than that is true. If you listen to what I say you'll forget your stomach.

*Fool.* I won't!

*Blind Man.* Listen. I know who the young man's father is, but I won't say; I would be afraid to say. . . . Ah, Fool, you would forget everything if you could know who the young man's father is!

*Fool.* Who is it? Tell me now, quick, or I'll shake you. Come, out with it, or I'll shake you!

[*A murmur of voices in the distance.*]

*Blind Man.* Wait, wait, there's somebody coming. . . . It is Cuchulain is coming. He's coming back with the High King. Go and ask Cuchulain. He'll tell you. It's little you'll care



about the cooking-pot when you have asked  
Cuchulain that.

*[Blind Man goes out by side door.]*

*Fool.* I'll ask him. Cuchulain will know. He  
was in Aoife's country. *[Going towards door at  
back.]* I'll ask him. *[Turns and goes to door at  
side.]* But no, I won't ask him. I would be  
afraid. *[Going up towards door and back again.]*  
Yes, I will ask him.—What harm in asking?—  
The blind man said I was to ask him.—*[Going to  
door at side again.]* No, no; I'll not ask him.—  
He might kill me.—I have but killed hens and  
geese and pigs. He has killed kings. *[Goes up  
again almost to door at back.]* Who says I'm  
afraid? I'm not afraid; I'm no coward. I'll  
ask him.—No, no, Cuchulain, I'm not going to  
ask you. *[Running to door at side.]*

He has killed kings,  
Kings and the sons of kings  
Dragons out of the water,  
And witches out of the air,

Bocanachs and Bananachs and people of the wood.

*[He runs out, the last words being heard out-  
side. Cuchulain and Conchubar enter through  
the big door at the back. While they are still  
outside Cuchulain's voice is heard raised in  
anger. He is a dark man, something over forty  
years of age. Conchubar is much older, though  
not feeble-looking.]*

*Cuchulain.* Because I have killed men without  
your bidding,  
And have rewarded others at my own pleasure,

Because of half a score of trifling things,  
You lay this oath upon me; and now—and now  
You add another pebble to the heap,  
And I must be your man, wellnigh your bondsman,  
Because a youngster out of Aoife's country  
Has found the shore ill guarded.

*Conchubar.* He came to land  
While you were somewhere out of sight and  
hearing;

Hunting or dancing with your wild companions.

*Cuchulain.* He can be driven out. I'll not be  
bound.

I'll dance or hunt, or quarrel or make love,  
Wherever or whenever I've a mind to.  
If time had not put water in your blood  
You never would have thought it.

*Conchubar.* I would leave  
A strong and settled country to my children.

*Cuchulain.* And I must be obedient in all things;  
Give up my will to yours, go where you please,  
Come where you will, sit at the council-board  
Among the unshapely bodies of old men!  
I, whose mere name has kept this country safe,  
I, that in early days have driven out  
Maeve of Cruachan and the northern pirates,  
The hundred kings of Sorchu and the kings  
Out of the Garden in the East of the World!  
Must I that held you on the throne, when all  
Had pulled you from it, swear obedience  
As if I were some cattle-raising king?  
Are my shins speckled with the heat of the fire,  
Or have my hands no skill but to make figures





Upon the ashes with a stick? Am I  
So slack and idle that I need a whip  
Before I serve you?

*Conchubar.* No, no whip, Cuchulain.  
But every day my children come and say:  
"This man is growing harder to endure.  
How can we be at safety with this man,  
That nobody can buy or bid or bind?  
We shall be at his mercy when you are gone.  
He burns the earth as if it were a fire,  
And time can never touch him."

*Cuchulain.* And so the tale  
Grows finer yet, and I am to obey  
Whatever child you set upon the throne  
As if it were yourself!

*Conchubar.* Most certainly.  
I am High King, my son shall be High King;  
And you, for all the wildness of your blood,  
And though your father came out of the sun,  
Are but a little king, and weigh but light  
In anything that touches government,  
If put into the balance with my children,

*Cuchulain.* It's well that we should speak our  
minds out plainly,  
For when we die we shall be spoken of  
In many countries. We in our young days  
Have seen the heavens like a burning cloud  
Brooding upon the world, and being more  
Than men can be, now that cloud's lifted up;  
We should be the more truthful, *Conchubar.*  
I do not like your children. They have no pith,  
No marrow in their bones, and will lie soft

Where you and I lie hard.

*Conchubar.* You rail at them  
Because you have no children of your own.

*Cuchulain.* I think myself most lucky that I leave  
No pallid ghost or mockery of a man  
To drift and mutter in the corridors  
Where I have laughed and sung.

*Conchubar.* That is not true,  
For all your boasting of the truth between us,  
For there is none that having house and lands,  
That have been in the one family,  
And called by the one name for centuries,  
But is made miserable if he know  
They are to pass into a stranger's keeping,  
As yours will pass.

*Cuchulain.* The most of men feel that;  
But you and I leave names upon the harp.

*Conchubar.* You play with arguments as lawyers  
do,  
And put no heart in them. I know your thoughts,  
For we have slept under the one cloak and drunk  
From the one wine cup. I know you to the bone.  
I have heard you cry—aye, in your very sleep—  
"I have no son!" and with such bitterness  
That I have gone upon my knees and prayed  
That it might be amended.

*Cuchulain.* For you thought  
That I should be as biddable as others  
Had I their reason for it; but that's not true,  
For I would need a weightier argument  
Than one that marred me in the copying,  
As I have that clean hawk out of the air,



That as men say begot this body of mine  
Upon a mortal woman.

*Conchubar.* Now as ever  
You mock at every measurable hope,  
And would have nothing or impossible things.  
What eye has ever looked upon the child  
Would satisfy a mind like that?

*Cuchulain.* I would leave  
My house and name to none that would not face  
Even myself in battle.

*Conchubar.* Being swift of foot,  
And making light of every common chance,  
You should have overtaken on the hills  
Some daughter of the air, or on the shore  
A daughter of the Country-under-Wave.

*Cuchulain.* I am not blasphemous.

*Conchubar.* Yet you despise  
Our queens, and would not call a child your own  
If one of them had borne him.

*Cuchulain.* I have not said it.

*Conchubar.* Ah, I remember I have heard you  
boast,

When the ale was in your blood, that there was one  
In Scotland, where you had learned the trade of war,  
That had a stone-pale cheek and red-brown hair,  
And that although you had loved other women,  
You'd sooner that fierce woman of the camp  
Bore you a son than any queen among them.

*Cuchulain.* You call her a fierce woman of the  
camp;

But having lived among the spinning-wheels,  
You'd have no woman near that would not say,

"Ah, how wise!" "What will you have for supper?"  
"What shall I wear that I may please you, sir?"  
And keep that humming through the day and night  
Forever. A fierce woman of the camp!—  
But I am getting angry about nothing.  
You have never seen her. Ah, Conchubar, had  
you seen her,

With that high, laughing, turbulent head of hers  
Thrown backward, and the bow-string at her ear,  
Or sitting at the fire with those grave eyes  
Full of good counsel as it were with wine,  
Or when love ran through all the lineaments  
Of her wild body—although she had no child,  
None other had all beauty, queen or lover,  
Or was so fitted to give birth to kings.

*Conchubar.* There's nothing I can say but drifts  
you farther

From the one weighty matter. That very woman—  
For I know well that you are praising Aoife—  
Now hates you, and will leave no subtilty  
Unknotted that might run into a noose  
About your throat, no army in idleness  
That might bring ruin on this land you serve.

*Cuchulain.* No wonder in that—no wonder at  
all in that.

I never have known love but as a kiss  
In the mid-battle, and a difficult truce  
Of oil and water, candles and dark night,  
Hillside and hollow, the hot-footed sun,  
And the cold sliding, slippery-footed moon—  
A brief forgiveness between opposites  
That have been hatreds for three times the age



Of this long-'stablished ground.

*Conchubar.*

Listen to me :

Aoife makes war on us, and every day  
Our enemies grow greater and beat the walls  
More bitterly, and you within the walls  
Are every day more turbulent ; and yet  
When I would speak about these things, your mind  
Runs as it were a swallow on the wind.  
Look at the door, and what men gather there—  
Old counsellors that steer the land with me  
And younger kings, the dancers and harp-players  
That follow in your tumults, and all these  
Are held there by the one anxiety.  
Will you be bound into obedience,  
And so make this land safe for them and theirs ?  
You are but half a king, and I but half.  
I need your might of hand and burning heart,  
And you my wisdom.

*[Outside the door in the blue light of the sea mist  
are many old and young kings ; amongst them  
are three women, two of whom carry a bowl  
full of fire. The third woman puts from time  
to time fragrant herbs into the fire so that it  
flickers up into brighter flame.]*

*Cuchulain.* *[Going near to the door.]*  
Nestlings of a high nest,  
Hawks that have followed me into the air  
And looked upon the sun, we'll out of this  
And sail upon the wind once more. This king  
Would have me take an oath to do his will,  
And having listened to his tune from morning,  
I will no more of it. Run to the stable

And set the horses to the chariot-pole,  
And send a messenger to the harp-players.  
We'll find a level place among the woods  
And dance awhile.

*A Young King.* Cuchulain, take the oath.  
There is none here that would not have you take it.

*Cuchulain.* You'd have me take it ? Are you of  
one mind ?

*The Kings.* All, all, all, all !

*A King.* Do what the High King bids you.

*Conchubar.* There is not one but dreads this tur-  
bulence,

Now that they are settled men.

*Cuchulain.* Are you so changed,  
Or have I grown more dangerous of late ?  
But that's not it. I understand it all.  
It's you that have changed. You've wives and  
children now,

And for that reason cannot follow one  
That lives like a bird's flight from tree to tree—  
It's time the years put water in my blood  
And drowned the wildness of it, for all's changed,  
But that unchanged.—I'll take what oath you will :  
The moon, the sun, the water, light, or air,  
I do not care how binding.

*Conchubar.* *[Who has seated himself in his great  
chair.]* On this fire

That has been lighted from your hearth and mine,  
The older men shall be my witnesses,  
The younger yours. The holders of the fire  
Shall purify the thresholds of the house  
With waving fire, and shut the outer door,



According to old custom, and sing rhyme  
That has come down from the old law-makers  
To blow the witches out. Considering  
That the wild will of man could by oath be bound,  
But that a woman's could not, they bid us sing  
Against the will of woman at its wildest  
In the shape-changers that run upon the wind.

[*The song of the Women.*]

May this fire have driven out  
The shape-changers that can put  
Ruin on a great king's house  
Until all be ruinous.  
Names whereby a man has known  
The threshold and the hearthstone,  
Gather on the wind and drive  
Women none can kiss and thrive,  
For they are but whirling wind,  
Out of memory and mind.  
They would make a prince decay  
With light images of clay  
Planted in the running wave;  
Or, for many shapes they have,  
They would change them into hounds  
Until he had died of his wounds,  
Though the change were but a whim;  
Or they'd hurl a spell at him,  
That he follow with desire  
Bodies that can never tire  
Or grow kind, for they anoint  
All their bodies joint by joint  
With a miracle-working juice  
That is made out of the grease

Of the ungoverned unicorn;  
But the man is thrice forlorn,  
Emptied, ruined, wracked, and lost,  
That they follow, for at most  
They will give him kiss for kiss  
While they murmur "After this  
Hatred may be sweet to the taste;"  
Those wild hands that have embraced  
All his body can but shove  
At the burning wheel of love  
Till the side of hate comes up.  
Therefore, in this ancient cup  
May the sword-blades drink their fill  
Of the home-brew there, until  
They will have for master none  
But the threshold and hearthstone.

[*After "Memory and mind" their words die away  
to a murmur, but are loud again at "Therefore  
in." The others do not speak when these words  
are loud.*]

*Cuchulain.* [*Speaking while they are singing.*]

I'll take and keep this oath, and from this day  
I shall be what you please, my nestlings.  
Yet I had thought you one of those that praised  
Whatever life could make the pulse run quickly,  
Even though it were brief, and though you held  
That a free gift was better than a forced;  
But that's all over.—I will keep it, too.  
I never gave a gift and took it again.  
If the wild horse should break the chariot-pole  
It would be punished. Should that be in the  
oath?—





*[Two of the women, still singing, crouch in front of him holding the bowl over their heads. He spreads his hands over the flame.]*

I swear to be obedient in all things  
To Conchubar, and to uphold his children.

*Conchubar.* We are one being, as these flames  
are one.

I give my wisdom, and I take your strength.  
Now thrust the swords in the flame, and pray  
That they may serve the threshold and the hearth-  
stone

With faithful service.

*[The Kings kneel in a semicircle before the two women and Cuchulain, who thrusts his sword in the flame. They all put the points of their swords in the flame. The third woman is at the back near the big door.]*

*Cuchulain.* O pure glittering ones,  
That should be more than wife or friend or mistress,  
Give us the enduring will, the unquenchable hope,  
The friendliness of the sword!—

*[The song grows louder, and the last words ring out clearly. There is a loud knocking at the door, and a cry of "Open! open!"]*

*Conchubar.* Some king that has been loitering  
on the way.

Open the door, for I would have all know  
That the oath's finished, and Cuchulain bound  
And that the swords are drinking up the flame.

*[The door is opened by the third woman, and a*

*Young Man with a drawn sword enters.*

*Young Man.* I am of Aoife's army.

*[The Kings rush towards him. Cuchulain throws himself between.]*

*Cuchulain.*

Put up your swords.

He is but one. Aoife is far away.

*Young Man.* I have come alone into the midst of  
you

To weigh this sword against Cuchulain's sword.

*Conchubar.* And are you noble? for if of common  
seed

You cannot weigh your sword against his sword  
But in mixed battle.

*Young Man.* I am under bonds

To tell my name to no man; but it's noble.

*Conchubar.* But I would know your name, and  
not your bonds.

You cannot speak in the Assembly House  
If you are not noble.

*First King.* Answer the High King!

*Young Man.* I will give no other proof than the  
hawk gives—

That it's no sparrow!

*[He is silent for a moment, then speaks to all.]*

Yet look upon me, kings.

I too am of that ancient seed, and carry  
The signs about this body and in these bones.

*Cuchulain.* To have shown the hawk's grey  
feather is enough,

And you speak highly, too. Give me that helmet!  
I'd thought they had grown weary sending cham-  
pions.

That sword and belt will do. This fighting's  
welcome.



The High King there has promised me his wisdom;  
But the hawk's sleepy till its well-beloved  
Cries out amid the acorns, or it has seen  
Its enemy like a speck upon the sun.

What's wisdom to the hawk, when that clear eye  
Is burning nearer up in the high air!

[*Looks hard at Young Man; then comes down  
steps and grasps the Young Man by his  
shoulder.*]

Hither into the light! [To Conchubar.

The very tint  
Of her that I was speaking of but now.  
Not a pin's difference. [To Young Man.

You are from the North,  
Where there are many that have that tint of hair—  
Red-brown, the light red-brown. Come nearer, boy,  
For I would have another look at you.  
There's more likeness—a pale, a stone-pale cheek.  
What brought you, boy? Have you no fear of  
death!

*Young Man.* Whether I live or die is in the Gods'  
hands.

*Cuchulain.* That is all words, all words; a young  
man's talk.

I am their plough, their harrow, their very strength;  
For he that's in the sun begot this body  
Upon a mortal woman, and I have heard tell  
It seemed as if he had outrun the moon,  
That he must follow always through waste heaven,  
He loved so happily. He'll be but slow  
To break a tree that was so sweetly planted.  
Let's see that arm! I'll see it if I like.

That arm had a good father and a good mother,  
But it is not like this.

*Young Man.* You are mocking me!  
You think I am not worthy to be fought.  
But I'll not wrangle but with this talkative knife.

*Cuchulain.* Put up your sword; I am not mocking  
you.

I'd have you for my friend; but if it's not  
Because you have a hot heart and a cold eye,  
I cannot tell the reason. [To Conchubar]. He has  
got her fierceness,

And nobody is as fierce as those pale women:  
And I will keep him with me, Conchubar,  
That he may set my memory upon it  
When the day's fading.

You will stop with us,  
And we will hunt the deer and the wild bulls;  
And, when we have grown weary, light our fires  
Between the wood and water, or on some mountain  
Where the shape-changers of the morning come.  
The High King there would make a mock of me  
Because I did not take a wife among them.  
Why do you hang your head? It's a good life.  
The head grows prouder in the light of the dawn,  
And friendship thickens in the murmuring dark,  
Where the spare hazels meet the wool-white foam.  
But I can see there's no more need for words,  
And that you'll be my friend from this day out.

*Conchubar.* He has come hither, not in his own  
name,

But in Queen Aoife's name; and has challenged us  
In challenging the foremost man of us all.



*Cuchulain.* Well, well, what matter!

*Conchubar.* You think it does not matter,  
And that a fancy lighter than the air,  
A whim of the moment has more matter in it,  
For having none that shall reign after you,  
You cannot think, as I do, who would leave  
A throne too high for insult.

*Cuchulain.* Let your children  
Re-mortar their inheritance as we have,  
And put more muscle on. I'll give you gifts,  
But I'd have something too—that arm-ring, boy.  
We'll have this quarrel out when you are older.  
*Young Man.* There is no man I'd sooner have  
my friend

Than you, whose name has gone about the world  
As if it had been the wind; but Aoife'd say  
I had turned coward.

*Cuchulain.* I will give you gifts,  
That Aoife'll know, and all her people know,  
To have come from me. [*Showing cloak which is  
on a chair.*] My father gave me this.  
He came to try me, rising up at dawn  
Out of the cold dark of the rich sea.  
He challenged me to battle, but before  
My sword had touched his sword, told me his name,  
Gave me this cloak, and vanished. It was woven  
By women of the Country-under-Wave  
Out of the fleeces of the sea. O! tell her  
I was afraid, or tell her what you will.  
No; tell her that I heard a raven croak  
On the north side of the house, and was afraid.

*Conchubar.* Some witch of the air has troubled  
Cuchulain's mind.

*Cuchulain.* No witchcraft. His head is like a  
woman's head

I had a fancy for.

*Conchubar.* A witch of the air  
Can make a leaf confound us with memories.  
They ride upon the wind and hurl the spells  
That make us nothing, out of the invisible wind.  
They have gone to school to learn the trick of it.

*Cuchulain.* No, no, there's nothing out of com-  
mon here;

The winds are innocent. That arm-ring, boy!

*A King.* If I've your leave, I'll take this chal-  
lenge up.

*Another King.* No, give it me, High King, for  
that wild Aoife

Has carried off my slaves.

*Another King.* No, give it me,  
For she has harried me in house and herd.

*Another King.* I claim this fight.

*Other Kings.* [*Together.*] And I! and I! and I!

*Cuchulain.* Back! back! Put up your swords!  
put up your swords!

There's none alive that shall accept a challenge  
I have refused. Laegaire put up your sword!

*Young Man.* No, let them come! If they've a  
mind for it,

I'll try it out with any two together.

*Cuchulain.* That's spoken as I'd have spoken at  
your age.

But you are in my house. Whatever man



Would fight with you shall fight it out with me.  
They're dumb, they're dumb? How many of you  
would meet

[*Draws sword.*]

This mutterer, this old whistler, this sand-piper,  
This edge that's greyer than the tide, this mouse  
That's gnawing at the timbers of the world,  
This, this—? Boy, I would meet them all in arms  
If I'd a son like you. He would avenge me  
When I have withstood for the last time the men  
Whose fathers, brothers, sons, and friends I have  
killed

Upholding Conchubar, when the four provinces  
Have gathered with the ravens over them.  
But I'd need no avenger. You and I  
Would scatter them like water from a dish.

*Young Man.* We'll stand by one another from  
this out.

Here is the ring.

*Cuchulain.* No, turn and turn about.  
But my turn's first, because I am the older.

[*Spreading out cloak.*]

Nine queens out of the Country-under-Wave  
Have woven it with the fleeces of the sea,  
And they were long embroidering at it. Boy,  
If I had fought my father, he'd have killed me  
As certainly as if I had a son,  
And fought with him, I should be deadly to him,  
For the old fiery fountains are far off,  
And every day there is less heat o' the blood.

*Conchubar.* [*In a loud voice.*] No more of that;  
I will not have this friendship.  
Cuchulain is my man, and I forbid it.

He shall not go unfought, for I myself—

*Cuchulain.* I will not have it.

*Conchubar.* You lay commands on me?

*Cuchulain.* [*Seizing Conchubar.*] You shall not  
stir, High King; I'll hold you there.

*Conchubar.* Witchcraft has maddened you.

*The Kings.* [*Shouting.*] Yes, witchcraft! witchcraft!

*First King.* Some witch has worked upon your  
mind, Cuchulain.

The head of that young man seemed like a woman's  
You had a fancy for. Then of a sudden  
You laid your hands on the High King himself.

[*He has taken his hands from the High King.*]

*He stands as if he were dazed.*

*Cuchulain.* And laid my hands on the High King  
himself.

*Conchubar.* Some witch is floating in the air  
above us.

*Cuchulain.* Yes, witchcraft, witchcraft. Witches  
of the air.

[*To Young Man.*]

Why did you? Who was it set you to this work?  
Out! out, I say! for now it's sword on sword!

*Young Man.* But . . . but I did not.

*Cuchulain.* Out, I say! out! out!

[*Young Man goes out followed by Cuchulain.*  
*The Kings follow them out with confused cries,*  
*and words one can hardly bear because of the*  
*noise. Some cry, "Quicker, quicker!" "Why*  
*are you so long at the door?" "We'll be*  
*too late!" "Have they begun to fight?"*  
*and so on; and one, it may be, "I saw him*





fight with Ferdia!" *Their voices drown each other. The three women are left alone.*

*First Woman.* I have seen, I have seen.

*Second Woman.* What do you cry aloud?

*First Woman.* The ever-living have shown me what's to come.

*Third Woman.* How? Where?

*First Woman,* In the ashes of the bowl.

*Second Woman.* While you were holding it between your hands?

*Third Woman.* Speak quickly!

*First Woman.* I saw Cuchulain's roof-tree Leap into fire, and the walls split and blacken.

*Second Woman.* Cuchulain has gone out to die.

*Third Woman.* O! O!

*Second Woman.* Who could have thought that one so great as he

Should meet his end at this unnoted sword!

*First Woman.* Life drifts between a Fool and a Blind Man

To the end, and nobody can know his end.

*Second Woman.* Come, look upon the quenching of this greatness.

*[The other two go to the door, but they stop for a moment upon the threshold and wail.]*

*First Woman.* No crying out, for there'll be need of cries

And knocking at the breast when it's all finished.

*[The women go out. There is a sound of clashing swords from time to time during what follows.]*

*Enter the Fool dragging the Blind Man.*

*Fool.* You have eaten it, you have eaten it!

You have left me nothing but the bones!

*[He throws Blind Man down by big chair.]*

*Blind Man.* O, that I should have to endure such a plague! O, I ache all over! O, I am pulled to pieces! This is the way you pay me all the good I have done you!

*Fool.* You have eaten it! You have told me lies. I might have known you had eaten it when I saw your slow, sleepy walk. Lie there till the kings come. O, I will tell Conchubar and Cuchulain and all the kings about you!

*Blind Man.* What would have happened to you but for me, and you without your wits? If I did not take care of you, what would you do for food and warmth?

*Fool.* You take care of me! You stay safe, and send me into every kind of danger. You sent me down the cliff for gull's eggs while you warmed your blind eyes in the sun; and then you ate all that were good for food. You left me the eggs that were neither egg nor bird. *[Blind Man tries to rise; Fool makes him lie down again.]* Keep quiet now, till I shut the door. There is some noise outside—a high vexing noise, so that I can't be listening to myself. *[Shuts the big door.]* Why can't they be quiet! why can't they be quiet! *[Blind Man tries to get away.]* Ah! you would get away, would you! *[Follows Blind Man and brings him back.]* Lie there! lie there! No, you won't get away! Lie there till the kings come. I'll tell them all about you. I will tell it all. How you sit warming yourself, when you have made me



light a fire of sticks, while I sit blowing it with my mouth. Do you not always make me take the windy side of the bush when it blows, and the rainy side when it rains?

*Blind Man.* O, good Fool! listen to me. Think of the care I have taken of you. I have brought you to many a warm hearth, where there was a good welcome for you, but you would not stay there; you were always wandering about.

*Fool.* The last time you brought me in it was not I who wandered away, but you that got put out because you took the crubeen out of the pot when nobody was looking. Keep quiet, now!

*Cuchulain.* [*Rushing in.*] Witchcraft! There is no witchcraft on the earth, or among the witches of the air, that these hands cannot break.

*Fool.* Listen to me Cuchulain. I left him turning the fowl at the fire. He ate it all, though I had stolen it. He left me nothing but the feathers.

*Cuchulain.* Fill me a horn of ale!

*Blind Man.* I gave him what he likes best. You do not know how vain this Fool is. He likes nothing so well as a feather.

*Fool.* He left me nothing but the bones and feathers. Nothing but the feathers, though I had stolen it.

*Cuchulain.* Give me that horn! Quarrels here, too! [*Drinks.*] What is there between you two that is worth a quarrel? Out with it!

*Blind Man.* Where would he be but for me? I must be always thinking—thinking to get food for the two of us, and when we've got it, if the

moon is at the full or the tide on the turn, he'll leave the rabbit in the snare till it is full of maggots, or let the trout slip back through his hands into the stream.

[*The Fool has begun singing while the Blind Man is speaking.*

[*Sings.*]

When you were an acorn on the tree top,

Then was I an eagle cock;

Now that you are a withered old block,

Still am I an eagle cock.

*Blind Man.* Listen to him now. That's the sort of talk I have to put up with day out, day in.

[*The Fool is putting the feathers into his hair.*

*Cuchulain takes a handful of feathers out of a heap the Fool has on the bench beside him, and out of the Fool's hair, and begins to wipe the blood from his sword with them.*

*Fool.* He has taken my feathers to wipe his sword. It is blood that he is wiping from his sword.

*Cuchulain.* [*Goes up to door at back and throws away feathers.*] They are standing about his body. They will not awaken him for all his witchcraft.

*Blind Man.* It is that young champion that he has killed. He that came out of Aoife's country.

*Cuchulain.* He thought to have saved himself with witchcraft.

*Fool.* That blind man there said he would kill you. He came from Aoife's country to kill you. That blind man said they had taught him every kind of weapon that he might do it. But I always knew that you would kill him.



*Cuchulain.* [*To the Blind Man.*] You knew him, then?

*Blind Man.* I saw him, when I had my eyes, in Aoife's country.

*Cuchulain.* You were in Aoife's country?

*Blind Man.* I knew him and his mother there.

*Cuchulain.* He was about to speak of her when he died.

*Blind Man.* He was a queen's son.

*Cuchulain.* What queen? what queen? [*Seizes Blind Man, who is now sitting upon the bench.*] Was it Scathach? There were many queens. All the rulers there were queens.

*Blind Man.* No, not Scathach.

*Cuchulain.* It was Uathach, then? Speak! speak!

*Blind Man.* I cannot speak; you are clutching me too tightly. [*Cuchulain lets him go.*] I cannot remember who it was. I am not certain. It was some queen.

*Fool.* He said a while ago that the young man was Aoife's son.

*Cuchulain.* She? No, no! She had no son when I was there.

*Fool.* That blind man there said that she owned him for her son.

*Cuchulain.* I had rather he had been some other woman's son. What father had he? A soldier out of Alba? She was an amorous woman—a proud, pale, amorous woman.

*Blind Man.* None knew whose son he was.

*Cuchulain.* None knew! Did you know, old listener at doors?

*Blind Man.* No, no; I knew nothing.

*Fool.* He said a while ago that he heard Aoife boast that she'd never but the one lover, and he the only man that had overcome her in battle. [*Pause.*]

*Blind Man.* Somebody is trembling, Fool! The bench is shaking. Why are you trembling? Is Cuchulain going to hurt us? It was not I who told you, Cuchulain.

*Fool.* It is Cuchulain who is trembling. It is Cuchulain who is shaking the bench.

*Blind Man.* It is his own son he has slain.

*Cucublain.* 'Twas they that did it, the pale windy people.

Where? where? where? My sword against the thunder!

But no, for they have always been my friends;  
And though they love to blow a smoking coal  
Till it's all flame, the wars they blow aflame  
Are full of glory, and heart-uplifting pride,  
And not like this. The wars they love awaken  
Old fingers and the sleepy strings of harps.  
Who did it, then? Are you afraid? speak out?  
For I have put you under my protection,  
And will reward you well. Dubthach the Chafer?  
He'd an old grudge. No, for he is with Maeve.  
Laegaire did it! Why do you not speak?  
What is this house? [*Pause.*] Now I remember all.

[*Comes before Conchubar's chair, and strikes out with his sword as if Conchubar was sitting upon it.*]

'Twas you who did it—you who sat up there  
With your old rod of kingship, like a magpie



Nursing a stolen spoon. No, not a magpie,  
A maggot that is eating up the earth!  
Yes, but a magpie, for he's flown away.  
Where did he fly to?

*Blind Man.* He is outside the door.

*Cucbulain.* Outside the door?

*Blind Man.* Between the door and the sea.

*Cucbulain.* Conchubar, Conchubar! the sword  
into your heart!

[*He rushes out.* *Pause.* Fool creeps up to the  
big door and looks after him.]

*Fool.* He is going up to King Conchubar. They  
are all about the young man. No, no, he is stand-  
ing still. There is a great wave going to break,  
and he is looking at it. Ah! now he is running  
down to the sea, but he is holding up his sword  
as if he were going into a fight. [*Pause.*] Well  
struck! well struck!

*Blind Man.* What is he doing now!

*Fool.* O! he is fighting the waves.

*Blind Man.* He sees King Conchubar's crown  
on every one of them.

*Fool.* There, he has struck at a big one! He has  
struck the crown off it; he has made the foam fly.  
There again, another big one!

*Blind Man.* Where are the kings! What are the  
kings doing?

*Fool.* They are shouting and running down to  
the shore, and the people are running out of the  
houses. They are all running.

*Blind Man.* You say they are running out of the  
houses? There will be nobody left in the houses.

Listen, Fool!

*Fool.* There, he is down! He is up again. He  
is going into the deep water. There is a big wave.  
It has gone over him. I cannot see him now. He  
has killed kings and giants, but the waves have  
mastered him, the waves have mastered him!

*Blind Man.* Come here, Fool!

*Fool.* The waves have mastered him.

*Blind Man.* Come here!

*Fool.* The waves have mastered him.

*Blind Man.* Come here, I say!

*Fool.* [*Coming towards him, but looking backward  
towards the door.*] What is it?

*Blind Man.* There will be nobody in the houses.  
Come this way; come quickly! The ovens will  
be full. We will put our hands into the ovens.

[*They go out.*]





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